

Bison decision a solid compromise on a difficult issue

Published by admin on Thu, 01/07/2016 - 8:36am – Livingston Enterprise

Late last year, Gov. Steve Bullock issued a management decision for bison migrating out of Yellowstone National Park that lets them roam more freely year-round in areas of Montana than they have been able to in decades.

The problem of bison moving out of the park in search of grazing lands has been a source of conflict for what seems like forever. In broad-stroke terms, it pits environmental and conservation groups, who generally favor more freedom for the animals, against livestock groups such as ranchers, who generally favor less.

Ranchers worry the bison, about half of which test positive for exposure to brucellosis, a disease that can cause cattle to miscarry, will be transmitted to their herds on the grazing lands outside the park. No case of wild bison-to-cattle transmission of brucellosis has been documented, but for the ranchers, the fear is nevertheless real. Also, ranchers and some other private property owners have a problem with property destruction the massive animals can cause.

As it concerns Park County, under the governor's decision, which works off previous state actions for increasing bison roaming in the area, "Bull bison will have year-round access within the Gardiner Basin from the northern boundary of YNP to the southern entrance of Yankee Jim Canyon. All bison will be managed to prohibit travel north of the hydrologic divide (i.e. mountain ridge-tops) toward Dome Mountain/Paradise Valley and Tom Miner Basin."

Access to the area by female bison, which would pose a higher risk for any brucellosis transmission, is limited to the non-calving winter season.

The move still allows for hazing or otherwise removing bison to prevent contact with cattle, to ensure human safety, or to keep them from roaming outside the new boundaries.

Bullock's decision is a well-thought-out, moderate compromise among all the parties that have so passionately argued the bison issue. It manages bison more as the wildlife they are rather than as livestock. It allows them more freedom to follow their ancient migrating instincts, yet still retains a way to deal with conflicts that could arise.

For something that has generated so much controversy for so long, there is surprisingly little public outcry from livestock groups. That's a good sign for the future of the two sides working together on a contentious issue.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
COUNCIL. 2015-16

An online Enterprise poll might indicate the general public's attitude toward the decision — 64 percent of those who voted agreed with the governor's move, while only 36 percent opposed it.

Maybe after all these years, we are on the road to working things out regarding the most famous symbol of the American West.

— *Dwight Harriman*
Enterprise News Editor

Gazette opinion

The Montana politics of roaming bison

Jan 6, 2016

Early last fall, state and federal agencies talked about killing 1,000 Yellowstone bison this winter. Then they backed off from that number, and said more vaguely that they would manage for a “decreasing population.” It’s estimated that at least 600 bison will have to be killed to keep the herds’ size from increasing with the expected 2016 calf production.

A few days before Christmas, Montana Gov. Steve Bullock announced his approval for limited numbers of Yellowstone bison to graze year round on certain public lands near West Yellowstone and Gardiner. Bullock’s approval would allow — for the first time in a century — bison to stay in Montana year round.

The Associated Press has reported that little opposition is expected to what Bullock called a “modest expansion,” but the National Park Service and other federal agencies have yet to OK that plan.

Then on Tuesday, the Interagency Bison Management Plan committee went back nearly where the winter 2016 plan started: The new target is 600 to 900 bison to be taken by hunters outside the park or by capture near the Gardiner entrance. As in previous years, captured bison will be hauled to slaughter and given to Native American tribes so meat and hides can be distributed to their members.

The plan’s success depends on what Mother Nature does. If snow is too deep or topped with an icy crust that makes foraging difficult, more bison will move down from the Yellowstone Plateau, seeking food in the lower elevations outside the park in Montana. It’s likely to be a one-way trip for those that cross into Montana. If the bison stay put, the IBMP won’t meet its population control goal.

Uncomfortable culling

“Many people are uncomfortable with the practice of culling bison, including the National Park Service,” Yellowstone Superintendent Dan Wenk said in a news release Tuesday. “The park would gladly reduce the frequency and magnitude of these operations if migrating bison had access to more habitat outside the park or there was a way to transfer live bison elsewhere.”

Bison aren’t welcome in Montana because of fear that they might spread the disease brucellosis to cattle, damage property or endanger people. About half of Yellowstone bison test positive for exposure to brucellosis, but that doesn’t mean they are sick or that they can sicken cattle. No cases of wild bison infecting cattle on the range have ever been documented.

Yellowstone is the only place where native bison have lived continuously since prehistoric times. The park is home to one of the only genetically pure populations of this native species surviving in the United States. These 4,900 or so animals are confined to the sanctuary of Yellowstone Park. The IBMP has set a goal of getting the population down to 3,500.

Yellowstone is studying the feasibility of developing quarantine facilities for bison, which the Park Service says, would allow bison that repeatedly test negative for disease “to be sent alive to other public, private, or tribal lands for conservation, hunting or food production.”

Considering that bison had been poached nearly to extinction at the turn of the 20th century, the species has proven remarkably resilient. As few as 25 bison survived in Yellowstone Park 100 years ago. Last summer, even after several thousand have been killed since the 1980s, the northern and central herds filled the Lamar, Hayden and Madison valleys. In June, caramel-colored calves dotted the grass between the darker, burlier cows.

A step in right direction

Bison may present the most complex wildlife management issue in Yellowstone. Like most other park wildlife species, they are hunted outside Yellowstone, but under restrictions that don’t apply to other hunts. Virtually every bison management decision involves six agencies: National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Montana Department of

Livestock, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, InterTribal Buffalo Council, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and Nez Perce Tribe.

This fall, those IBMP partners received more than 3,000 comments from all over the country on a proposal for a new bison management plan. Those public comments are to be used in creating the draft environmental impact statement that is expected to be released this summer. A final EIS isn't expected until the fall of 2017 when it would replace the Interagency Bison Management Plan finalized in 2000.

The plan must be based on sound science and recognize that bison have always been part of Yellowstone Country. Private property must be protected. But in the millions of acres of public land that comprises the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, there should be room for bison to roam, and to be managed more like other grazing wildlife.

Bullock' Christmas week announcement is a step in the right direction.

Gov. Bullock's bison plan deserves support

Jan 3, 2016 – Bozeman Daily Chronicle

Gov. Steve Bullock's proposal to tolerate Yellowstone Park bison outside park boundaries in Montana year-round is historic. And now it merits the approval of other state and federal agencies with a stake in the game.

Bullock has proposed allowing bison to roam outside the park's western boundary in the Horse Butte area north to the Taylor Fork drainage. And bison would also be tolerated outside the park's northern edge to Yankee Jim Canyon.

It's a modest proposal that is drawing criticism from bison advocates for not going far enough. But it's one that recognizes the political realities of this contentious issue. And it's an important step.

Now it needs the approval of federal and state officials involved in the Interagency Bison Management Plan. And they should extend that approval. There will likely be objections to parts or all of the proposal from some involved in the process. And it may have to be adjusted to answer some of those objections. But in the end, it should be adopted essentially intact.

Montana's history with this iconic species has been a rocky one involving systematic killing of roaming bison and hazing the animals back into the park with helicopters. In many years, bison have been slaughtered, drawing the attention of national media and rightfully creating a public relations nightmare for the state.

That spectacle prompted state and federal officials to seek a better way for dealing with park bison. Bullock's proposal is the culmination of that effort.

In many ways, the Yellowstone region has become an example for the nation and the world of how a natural environment can be preserved and enhanced, even in the face of population and

tourism growth. Wolves had been reintroduced to their historic range and are thriving here. A grizzly bear population that was in crisis 40 years ago has recovered to where federal protections of the species may soon be lifted.

Now Montana can become first state to manage bison the way they should be — as a species of wildlife.

Editorial Board

- **Stephanie Pressly**, publisher
- **Nick Ehli**, managing editor
- **Bill Wilke**, opinion page editor
- **Don Beeman**, community member
- **Richard Broome**, community member
- **Renee Gavin**, community member
- **Sarabeth Rees**, community member

To send feedback on editorials, either leave a comment on the page below or write toctydesk@dailychronicle.com.

Science, not rhetoric, should lead bison decisions

Jan 22, 2016 – Bozeman Daily Chronicle

A recent vote by a state legislative panel to oppose Gov. Steve Bullock's plan to tolerate Yellowstone bison outside the park year-round is a purely political gesture into what should be a scientific issue.

The state Environmental Quality Council voted 8-7 to send a letter to the federal and state agencies involved in the Interagency Bison Management Plan, urging them to reject the proposal to allow limited numbers of bison to roam west of the park from Horse Butte to the Taylor Fork and north of the park to Yankee Jim Canyon.

The EQC is comprised of 12 lawmakers and four citizen members, the and lawmakers' votes split cleanly along party lines with all Republicans voting to send the letter and all Democrats voting not to. That alone indicates the extent to which this issue has become politicized — much to the detriment of the welfare of bison as a species.

Livestock interests have historically opposed letting bison roam outside the park out of fear they will infect cattle with brucellosis — a disease that causes them to abort their fetuses. The transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle has never happened in the wild. And every case of infection in livestock has been traced to exposure to elk. But some ranchers refuse to acknowledge these facts and they and their advocates insist on opposing any tolerance for bison outside the park. This stubborn resistance raises the question of whether the real issue is the availability of forage for grazing on public lands.

In reality, the EQC letter to agencies who must make the decision on Bullock's proposal means nothing. When the IBMP agencies — including the federal Park Service and Forest Service and the state departments of Livestock and Fish, Wildlife and Parks among others — meet, they probably will take public note of it. But, hopefully, they will make their decision based on the best science.

It's time to move on from the same tired old arguments against tolerating bison on public lands outside Yellowstone Park. It's time to make room for bison as a legitimate species of wildlife in Montana.

Editorial Board

- **Stephanie Pressly**, publisher
- **Nick Ehli**, managing editor
- **Bill Wilke**, opinion page editor
- **Don Beeman**, community member
- **Richard Broome**, community member
- **Renee Gavin**, community member
- **Sarabeth Rees**, community member

To send feedback on editorials, either leave a comment on the page below or write tcitydesk@dailychronicle.com.